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Richard H. Weiner (2015). Politics and Culture: Influences in Humboldt's Appraisal of Mexico's Natural Wealth. *Terceras Jornadas de Historia Económica*. Mexico City: ASOCIACIÓN MEXICANA DE HISTORIA ECONÓMICA.
http://opus.ipfw.edu/history_facpubs/135

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**Politics and Culture:
Influences in Alexander von Humboldt's Appraisal of Mexico's Natural Wealth**

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AMHE Congreso, Colegio de México, 17-20 Febrero, 2015

Introduction

This conference paper is part of a larger book project that traces discourse on Mexico's legendary wealth from the age of Humboldt to the mid-20th century. Throughout the 19th century, conventional wisdom was that Mexico was naturally rich. In the 20th century (especially during the post-Revolutionary 1920s-1950s era), in contrast, the dominant view was that Mexico was naturally poor. The book project asks a central question: how do we explain this dramatic shift in assessments? The topic of Mexico's natural riches has been discussed in countless works, but there are no in-depth studies. Nevertheless, there are some assumptions that inform commentary on the subject. A positivist perspective informed 20th century critics (such as Carlos Díaz Dufoo and Daniel Cosío Villegas) of the idea that Mexico was naturally rich. In the writings of these critics, earlier appraisals were inflated and their own more modest assessments were accurate. Furthermore, modern scholars, who write of an exaggerated sense of Mexico's wealth in the age of independence and beyond, seem to also be informed by critics' positivism. Modern scholars' assumption seems to be that the critics were right. A downgrading was a needed "corrective" in the endeavor to create a more accurate assessment. This project, in contrast, does not emphasize positivism. Rather, it highlights the importance of other influences in the discourse about Mexico's natural wealth. In the examination of both the promoters and detractors of the idea that Mexico was naturally rich, this project highlights the importance of national identity, politics, and economic culture (i.e., conceptions of what constituted and generated wealth).

This paper focuses on the writings of Humboldt, arguably the key figure in the discourse about Mexico's natural wealth owing to his writings and their influence. Positivist critics of the idea that Mexico was naturally rich maintained that

Humboldt played an important role in promoting an inflated sense of Mexico's natural riches, an erroneous notion (according to critics) that critic Daniel Cosío Villegas refers to as "Mexico's legendary wealth." Interestingly, contemporary defenders of Humboldt have also been influenced by positivism. One, for example, maintained that Humboldt's detractors inaccurately portrayed Humboldt's writings. An accurate portrayal needed to take into account the fact that Humboldt, along with noting Mexico's natural advantages, also discussed the obstacles that needed to be overcome in the quest to exploit Mexico's natural resources. So, according to this defender, Humboldt was not guilty as charged since he acknowledged Mexico's challenges. Thus, Humboldt's assessment was accurate. (An interesting side note is that Humboldt himself critiqued some for exaggerating Mexico's natural riches. For example, he maintained that some exaggerated California's wealth in precious metals.)

This paper takes a different approach to Humboldt. It maintains that despite the fact that Humboldt used statistics, tables, and was engaged in the scientific enterprise of accurately measuring and cataloguing numerous aspects of the physical environment, his project regarding Mexico's natural riches was not primarily a measuring project. Rather, it was a cultural and political enterprise. The contention here is that Humboldt himself conceived of his project in this cultural and political fashion. The paper first examines culture in the form of social ideals and then turns to politics. The cultural section highlights economy and focuses on notions of what generated and constituted what Humboldt termed "prosperity." The political section stresses the fact that Humboldt wrote for (in his own words) the "statesman" with the intent of influencing policymaking. Thus, rather than a measuring project, it was a political endeavor that recommended specific policies that would enable Mexico to exploit its potential wealth. Further departing from strict quantification, Humboldt's political project was informed by his imagination, and his vivid forecast of Mexico's future had a visionary flavor. The parts of the paper are joined in the sense that some of Humboldt's social ideals discussed in the first part are components of Humboldt's forecast for Mexico's economic future examined in the second half.

Humboldt's Social Ideals and Assessment of Mexico's Natural Wealth

Humboldt's writing on Mexico focused more on economy than his other works. Humboldt was a wide-ranging thinker who saw interconnections between everything and therefore eschewed specialization. His holistic and comprehensive approach is best exemplified by *Cosmos*, his ambitious last work. In keeping with this holistic approach, Humboldt's *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, which was broad in scope, cannot be characterized as a work of political economy. Nevertheless, it did feature the economy to a large degree. The same can be said for the only other work in which he used the words "Political Essay" in the title: *Political Essay on Cuba*. Humboldt chose this particular title for a reason. More than his other works, in these publications Humboldt featured the economy, and made strong cases for political reforms in the economic and social spheres. In *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, Humboldt explicitly states that his endeavor, more than providing general information about the natural environment, is intended to provide information to the statesman about exploiting Mexico's natural wealth. True to his assertion, his work on Mexico is full of economic information and policy suggestions to develop branches of the economy. While perhaps a bit too narrow in its characterization, there is an element of truth in one scholar's claim that *Political Essay on New Spain* was an "economic manual."

It has been well established that Humboldt sought to scientifically measure and record aspects of Mexico's physical environment, including economic aspects (e.g., soil fertility). As scholars have noted, Humboldt utilized extensive data in Mexican archives, which he was given full access to. Furthermore, he brought numerous tools to carry out his own experiments and make his own measurements, information he utilized to supplement the data Mexicans supplied him with. Scholars, too, have acknowledged Humboldt's achievements in scientific measurement and data collection, labeling his methodology "Humboldtian science" and maintaining that it proved influential. Nevertheless, Humboldt's social values also strongly influence his appraisal of Mexico's natural wealth. Humboldt is explicit on this point. In fact, he challenges what he depicts as conventional wisdom about

the cornerstone of Mexico's natural riches, contending that common assumptions are wrong. One of the agendas of his book is to offer a corrective. Thus, Humboldt's assessment of Mexico's natural wealth is shaped by his social ideals.

Humboldt's social concerns are evident in his lengthy discussions of the problems of inequality and human welfare. One place the dilemma of inequality comes up is in his discussion of "prosperity." Unlike Smith, who speaks of the "wealth" of nations, Humboldt utilizes the term "prosperity." It appears that Humboldt feels that "prosperity," which seems to refer to material well-being, should be a state that all members of society enjoy. Humboldt argues this is not the case in New Spain. Humboldt boldly states Mexico is a land of extreme inequality. He maintains that there is great wealth in Mexico, but a very high level of inequality. Great fortunes exist alongside tremendous poverty. This is reflected in the caste system, for the group at the bottom, Mexico's indigenous people, is impoverished, and the group at the top, the creoles, is rich. Humboldt, relying largely on Mexican accounts, documents numerous ways Mexico's indigenous population is exploited. Humboldt's concern with the human welfare of all members of society is also evident in his discussions of poverty, starvation, population decline, and illness.

In addition to critiquing inequality from a moral perspective, he also attacks it from a political and social angle. A prominent example is at the very end of his multi-volume study. Humboldt notes that there is significant inequality in New Spain because not all share in and enjoy the fruits of its "prosperity." He warns that this inequality could have dire social consequences, for it could inspire Mexico's indigenous population to revolt. He cites the 1780s Tupac Amaru rebellion in Peru as a case in point. It is worth noting that warning about the dire social consequences of inequality and exploitation is a strategy Humboldt utilizes to make a case for social reform on other occasions too. For example, in *Political Essay on Cuba* Humboldt warns that unless Cuba makes progress towards abolition it may experience a slave rebellion, as the case of Haiti illustrates.

Another way Humboldt articulates his social concerns and his support for individual liberty and freedom is via his criticisms of coercive labor systems. His attack on slavery is a case in point. He praises Mexico for its limited use of slavery,

maintaining Mexico is superior to other parts of Spanish America and the United States in this regard since these other areas are more dependent on slave labor. Owing to the limited utilization of slavery in Mexico, Humboldt's critique of the institution in *Political Essay on New Spain* is limited. In contrast, he harshly critiques slavery in *Political Essay on Cuba*. A testament to the strength of the critique is the fact that when a pro-slavery American southerner translated *Political Essay on Cuba* into English in the 1850s, he deleted a lengthy section that severely attacked the institution of slavery largely from a humanitarian angle. Humboldt's discussion of the conditions of free workers is another example of the way social concerns and the promotion of individual liberty informs his analysis. He mostly praises Mexico on this topic, commending the Crown for abolishing the *encomienda* system and also asserting that labor in the mines is free. He is displeased with the coercive labor conditions in the *obrajes*, however.

What is the basis of Humboldt's social ideology, which, as we will see below, influences his appraisal of Mexico's natural wealth? Whereas political economy influences his reform agenda, it does not seem to play a notable role in his social ideals. Rather, Enlightenment liberal ideals of equality, liberty, and individualism seem to be at work. Unsurprisingly, Humboldt supports the French Revolution. Its liberal social ideals appear to inspire his potent critiques of inequality, exploitation, and slavery. Liberal reform ideals particularly related to colonialism also proved influential. In this age of revolution there were critiques of the idea that the colony existed solely for the benefit of the imperial power. Humboldt embraced this critique, championing the interests of the colony. Perhaps liberal political economy proved more influential in this instance, as a notable strand in this critique was a liberal economic critique of a mercantilist colonial economic philosophy. We can see this in Humboldt's embrace of some of the more liberal elements of the Bourbon Reforms, particularly the liberalization of trade.

Despite Humboldt's call for a reformulation of the imperial relationship in a way that afforded more autonomy to the colonies, it would be a stretch to call him a revolutionary. True, he wrote during the age of the Spanish American Revolutions, and, as his *Political Essay on Cuba*, which appeared shortly after most of Spanish

America had gained its independence, shows, he supported the newly independent nations. Nevertheless, his publications before Spanish American independence was achieved did not explicitly promote revolution. It's hard to determine why not. Perhaps he felt beholden to the imperial power since it authorized his five-year visit; perhaps he envisioned an evolving relationship between the Spanish Crown and its colonies that provided more autonomy to the latter; perhaps his dislike for violence and preference for reform played a role; perhaps it was a combination of aforementioned factors that explains why he did not explicitly promote independence. Whatever the case may be, it does not detract from the fact that Humboldt was critical of aspects of the colonial relationship and promoted reforms. Apparently Great Britain's refusal to allow Humboldt to visit its colonies after his trip to Spanish America was informed by British concerns that Humboldt would critique British colonialism, as he had done in the Spanish case.

Let us now explore the specific ways that Humboldt's social ideals shaped his assessment of Mexico's natural wealth. One of Humboldt's central points is that far too much significance and attention has been and currently is placed on precious metals. Humboldt characterizes conventional wisdom as placing silver on a pedestal, treating the precious metal as the most valuable natural resource in New Spain. Humboldt critiques the great value and focus placed on silver in several ways. One is what might be characterized as a nationalist critique of the colonial system perspective. Humboldt maintains that silver extraction benefits Spain rather than Mexico. Also from this nationalist perspective, Humboldt complains that a focus on silver results in inattention to mining Mexico's industrial minerals, which could be utilized to develop local industry (more on this topic below). Finally, Humboldt critiques silver from what might be termed a foundation of wealth angle. He asserts that silver is not true wealth, but rather merely a "symbol" of wealth. The basis of wealth, Humboldt counters, is agriculture. Claiming agriculture is the basis of wealth is in keeping with Physiocratic thought. However, Humboldt does not provide a theoretical justification, so it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which he was influenced by Physiocratic ideals. What is clear, however, is that Humboldt's emphasis on agriculture is informed by his social ideals.

Let us now turn to the ways that social concerns informed Humboldt's discussion of agriculture. One way we can see this is in the way Humboldt organizes his discussion of agriculture. He provides an explicit explanation. He asserts that he orders his discussion according to significance, starting with the most important and ending with the least. He starts with agricultural resources for national consumption. Next he examines natural resources utilized in national industries (e.g., grape cultivation for the wine-making industry). Finally, he examines what he termed the "so-called colonial products," that is, the export agriculture sector.

His specific discussion of the production for local consumption also reveals his concerns with social welfare and health. He starts the section by explaining that he will not discuss all the different agricultural products that could grow. Rather, he will focus on "useful" products. It appears that "useful" means agricultural production that provides sustenance and nutrition to the population. His lengthy discussion of bananas is a case in point. He is very enthusiastic about bananas because, he maintains, they are very nutritious, a topic he goes on about at great length. Scholar José Enrique Covarrubias maintains that Humboldt's analysis of consumption turned conventional wisdom on its head. Humboldt critiques the consumption of expensive European goods (which, for Humboldt, are non-essentials) and advocates increased consumption of nutritious agricultural goods that have been disparaged (i.e., the banana). Another way Humboldt expresses his concern for social welfare is in his discussion of crop diversification, which, he maintains, is a way to combat starvation (see more on this below).

Developing Mexico's Economic Potential: Humboldt as Visionary

Political Essay is encyclopedic and full of data, but also has a coherent vision. Metaphorically speaking, Humboldt examines the trees but does not lose sight of the forest. Indeed, the many of the facts and statistics amassed in *Political Essay* add up to a vivid picture of what Mexico can become. In this sense, Humboldt is something of an economic visionary, drawing a portrait of what Mexico will look like after it develops its potential. Humboldt's discourse emphasizes Mexico's immense potential, rooted in its considerable natural advantages. This potential will not

develop autonomously, however. Humboldt's discourse is structured in such a way that a wide range of impediments need to be overcome in order for Mexico to achieve prosperity. Thus, Humboldt's study is full of policy prescriptions and priorities that will enable Mexico to achieve greatness. One of the connections between this part of the paper and the previous part is that, by following the appropriate policies, Humboldt envisions some of his socioeconomic ideals being realized.

Before turning to Humboldt's economic predictions, I will briefly explore influences that perhaps inspired him to focus on forecasting about Mexico's economic potential and future development. Rather than an exhaustive explanation, I will make three points. 1) As the work of José Enrique Covarrubias demonstrates, William Petty's *Political Arithmetic* influenced Humboldt. Recent scholarship on Petty's *Political Arithmetic* demonstrates that it was very much a political project about developing economic potential. Petty focused on policy proposals for Britain to follow in Ireland. It is worth noting, too, that Petty had economic interests in Ireland. In keeping with Petty, Humboldt is very focused on policy proposals. What interested him most is how to exploit Mexico's economic potential. Again and again, he states that he is providing information that will be useful to the statesman. 2) Another strong influence on Humboldt was Adam Smith. Perhaps, Smith's influence, in a loose sort of way, was similar to Petty's. Smith, as is well known, critiqued what he labeled "mercantilism." Furthermore, part of his critique examined the historical example (including contemporary history) of European colonialism in the Americas. Thus, a critique of the economics of colonialism was incorporated into Smith's strategy to develop the wealth of nations. Hence it had strong policy implications. In line with Smith, Humboldt's critique of Spanish colonialism is prescriptive. The entire point is to change policies, and the justification is related to the positive outcomes that Humboldt predicted. 3) Finally, the scholarly debate over if Humboldt was a Romantic or Enlightenment thinker also has relevance. Scholars have addressed this controversy in different ways. One has been to say that some writings by Humboldt were more influenced by Romanticism, and others more by Enlightenment thought. One scholar has argued that *Political Essay* was more

influenced by the latter. While it is true that Humboldt utilized different styles in different publications, it is also true that he did not like narrow categories. He rejected the movement towards academic specialization and championed a more holistic approach. I think that there is evidence of this in *Political Essay*, resulting in a work influenced by both the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Romanticism, I think, is particularly important for the issues I am delving into here. There is a strong imaginative element in *Political Essay*. Furthermore, while Humboldt's discussion of "potential" wealth has elements of Petty in it, we might also say there are elements of Romanticism. One line in *Political Essay on Cuba* is revealing in this regard. Humboldt states that he prefers to write about new countries to old ones because new ones stimulate his imagination. I think one could argue that there is a Romantic visionary and imaginative element in Humboldt's work on Mexico. He vividly imagines what Mexico could become.

Humboldt's forecasts about Mexico's economic potential are largely rooted in his analysis of the natural environment and the economic opportunities it provided. This is not to say that Humboldt is an economic determinist. He notes the consequences of other factors on economy, e.g., institutions, the characteristics of the workforce, the production process, consumption patterns, and policies. Nevertheless, the natural environment serves as something of the framework for his analysis. In Humboldt's economic analysis of the environment many elements came into play, including climate, geography, topography, altitude, location, natural resource endowment (e.g., agriculture, industrial minerals and precious metals, products of the sea), etc. Scholars and intellectuals have noted Humboldt's emphasis on the physical environment. José Enrique Covarrubias labels Humboldt's notion of wealth "natural," and provides an in-depth analysis and explanation, even showing how Humboldt's "natural" notion of wealth influenced Mexican thinkers (most notably Tadeo Ortiz) in the early national era. While Porfirian thinkers did not provide in-depth analysis, they made similar assertions, claiming that in the age of Humboldt nature was seen as the basis of wealth, a contrast with the Porfiriato, Porfiristas maintained, when capital was king. Porfirian economist Carlos Díaz Dufoo's contention that Humboldt's claim that the north was an economic wasteland

owing to physical disadvantages was proved wrong during the Porfiriato when capital and technology transformed northern deserts into gardens revealed this contrast in attitudes, as well as Porfiristas' characterizations of Humboldt.

Humboldt sought to reveal Mexico's economic potential and possibilities to the statesman based on its natural conditions. Not only his discussion of branches of the economy, but also labor, reveals the importance he placed on the natural environment. Humboldt maintains that the natural environment is the determining factor in work ethic. In cold climates (here Humboldt referred to Europe) with limited natural advantages people had to work hard to survive, and thus were very productive. But in tropical climates in which nature almost autonomously provided sustenance for human survival people were lazy and unproductive (as was the case in some regions of Mexico, according to Humboldt).

Despite the fact that Humboldt was familiar with and influenced by political economists (he termed them "economists" and cited Adam Smith and others), his focus on the physical environment was not really couched in the discourse of political economy about different factors of production (e.g., Smith's "division of labor"). Rather, his focus seems to have stemmed from his keen interest in geography, a field to which he made significant contributions. As Margarita Bowen has shown, Humboldt was a major force in the emergence of modern geographical thought. His great interest in grasping and experiencing a region's physical environment is also exemplified by his critique of foreigners who only visited coastal regions. Humboldt maintained visiting the interior was important.

What were Mexico's natural advantages, according to Humboldt? Humboldt's answer to this question was extensive. Here I will include only the briefest summary of some of the principal positive physical attributes he mentioned (some of them, he repeatedly mentioned). Humboldt emphasizes Mexico's enormous territorial size (he did not include Central America in his measurement, even if it was part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain). He also stresses the great variety of climates in Mexico, a diversity that was a consequence of Mexico's large size and varied topography, which resulted in Mexico having both temperate and tropical zones. Another positive attribute Humboldt emphasizes is the soil's great fertility; a condition that

Humboldt suggests is widespread (even if he notes that some isolated regions, e.g., parts of the North, are not privileged in this regard). Mineral wealth, not only precious metals but also industrial minerals, is another natural advantage. Commercial location, sandwiched between the Atlantic and Pacific, is yet another asset.

Humboldt creates a picture of what Mexico will look like after it fully exploits its natural advantages. It would be a juggernaut, a global powerhouse. At times he noted obstacles that needed to be overcome to achieve his economic and socioeconomic greatness. Other times he simply suggests that a change in priorities is needed. Yet other times he does not supply a step-by-step plan. In these instances he seems content to reveal Mexico's natural advantages and seemed to assume that was sufficient information to enable the statesman to take advantage of this natural wealth, and turn potential riches into concrete wealth.

Part of Humboldt's vision centers on population growth (a topic Petty examined at great length). Humboldt's analysis of the current state of Mexican demography emphasizes inadequacies. One is that the population is too small, something he makes clear with his comparative analysis that shows that Mexican cities and regions have a much smaller population than their European counterparts (especially in Britain and France). Another problem Humboldt stresses is the poor distribution of Mexico's population. Some regions (notable the Pacific Coast) could not develop adequately because of a small population. Humboldt maintains that Mexico could sustain considerable population growth, maintaining it could support a 10-fold increase! Further, by properly distributing the population to regions that had valuable resources but lacked people to exploit them, Mexico could flourish. For example, Humboldt suggests that peopling the Pacific Coast will help establish trade relations with Asia since Mexico is privileged with good natural ports. Similarly, the only thing missing for Mexico to prosper in the whaling industry are people to exploit this valuable resource of the sea.

How could Mexico sustain so many people? As noted, using comparative statistics Humboldt shows Mexico is underpopulated. Further, Mexico's great agricultural potential would enable it to produce enough to support a large

population. Problems of starvation and underconsumption were not rooted in the natural environment, but rather policy. As noted, Mexico's vast agricultural potential was not taken advantage of owing to a focus on precious metals. Mexico could produce much more food if that became a priority. Further focusing on the needs of the local population, Humboldt complains that agricultural production for export is given priority over production for local consumption. Humboldt's analysis suggests that once priorities are corrected to stress agriculture, particularly production for local consumption rather than export, there will be plenty of food to sustain population growth. Another advantage is Mexico's varied climate, which will enable the country to grow a huge variety of crops. Thus, Mexico's natural conditions facilitate crop diversification, which, according to Humboldt, provides a kind of insurance policy against crop failures, which caused underconsumption and even starvation. Owing to diversification, if one crop failed, the population could rely on another.

Underscoring the importance of production for local consumption, however, did not mean that Mexico had to give up export agriculture. A robust agriculture export regime is part of his future vision for Mexico. Not only will Mexico be able to export, but, along with the U.S., Mexico will become the leading agricultural exporter in the Americas. Humboldt suggests that the Caribbean's leading role is unnatural. Policy, which does not promote Mexican agriculture, explains why Mexico has not been more successful. Owing to Mexico's large size, good climate, and fertile soil, it is destined to eclipse the Caribbean and become a leading exporter of sugar and cotton. Humboldt's export vision does not undermine his social ideals. In fact, it even strengthens them. First, exports will not come at the expense of production for local consumption since Mexico had the capacity to sustain both. Second, Humboldt sees Mexican agricultural exports as a way to challenge the institution of slavery in the Americas. Unlike the Caribbean, Humboldt maintains, Mexico's export industry will use free labor. Humboldt explains that this will challenge the strong association between exports and slavery in the Americas, and in this regard will make the Americas more like Europe, where agriculture is not associated with slavery. (By the 1820s, when it appeared Humboldt's forecast failed to materialize as a Caribbean

slavery-based agricultural regime still flourished in Cuba, Humboldt began focusing more on a moral critique of slavery and placed less emphasis on his economic critique.)

Ironically, silver production plays a role in Humboldt's forecast for a robust agricultural economy in Mexico. Humboldt challenges the economists' assertion that the production of silver hinders agriculture. Humboldt cites the case of the Guadalajara region as a case in point, showing that agriculture flourishes in a mining center. Location, climate, and resources are crucial, and they are especially advantageous in Mexico. Humboldt illustrates this by showing that the location of Mexico's silver mines is much more conducive to agricultural development than the Peruvian case. Consequently, Humboldt maintains that there is a synergy between silver production and agriculture, and that both branches of the economy could be robust. Mexico's natural conditions bode for a positive economic future. The only thing needed is a change in priorities by putting greater emphasis on developing Mexican agriculture, both for local consumption and export.

As Mexico is to place more stress on agriculture, so too, Humboldt asserts, should it focus more on industrial minerals. His position on this matter reveals yet another departure from liberal economic theory. Rather than adhering to Ricardian comparative advantage and the international division of labor, Humboldt champions a more of a balanced sectoral development, which national industry is a component of. This focus on national industry seems to be informed by his social ideals. As noted, in his ordering of his discussion of agriculture based on importance, industrial raw materials and minerals came in second, right after agriculture for local production. Exploiting raw materials for local production, thus, is given a higher priority than export agriculture. This is in keeping with Humboldt's stress on production for local consumption. Consuming locally produced goods is thus favored over consuming foreign luxury goods.

Humboldt argues that Mexico had promising natural conditions to develop a robust manufacturing sector. He illustrates this by contrasting Mexico with the Caribbean. Humboldt suggests that industrializing the Caribbean makes little sense owing to geographic and demographic factors. Caribbean islands are small and are

privileged with plenty of coastal regions, which facilitate the importation of goods. Furthermore, Caribbean islands do not have large enough populations to sustain local industry. Mexico is a study in contrasts. First, its population is much larger, thus there are plenty of consumers. Second, Mexico covers a large landmass, which makes importing goods challenging. What makes matters worse is the fact that transportation routes to the interior are undeveloped. Owing to these conditions, Humboldt maintains, Mexico is an ideal place to develop industries to fill the needs of the local population. Furthermore, Mexico is privileged with raw materials that can be utilized for local industries. So, what is holding Mexico back? Spanish policies. He seems to suggest that prioritizing precious metals is the biggest problem. But he also discusses mercantilist ideals of restricting the colony's national industry so it will import Spanish finished goods. He maintains that even though these restrictions on local industry are not strictly enforced that they nevertheless have something of a stifling effect. Overall, the reader is left with the impression that Mexico has the natural and demographic conditions suitable for the development of local manufacturing, and changes in policies and priorities will allow Mexican industry to develop.

Another major topic Humboldt discusses is international commerce. In this realm he has bold predictions of grandeur, namely, that Mexico will be an international commercial hub between Asia and Europe owing to its geographical location. Part of the way that Mexico's commercial role will be enhanced is via implementing liberal trade policies. Humboldt illustrates this by showing that the trade liberalization of the Bourbon Reforms resulted in a significant increase in Mexican commerce. But the most significant thing that will transform Mexico's potential into concrete gains is the construction of a canal, which will create a waterway between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Humboldt's assumption seems to be that it is obvious that this will transform Mexico into a commercial center because he does not really go into details about exactly why this waterway will increase commerce. Rather, what he focuses on is where to construct the canal, a topic he discusses at great length. He covers the topic for several pages in book one, and later goes into the topic at much more length, discussing numerous potential spots

and pointing out the pros and cons of each one. Obviously Humboldt was not the first to discuss this (he notes many antecedents). Nevertheless, his lengthy discussions certainly emphasized Mexico's potential, and his vision of Mexico as a global commercial hub was very compelling.

Conclusion

This paper is part of a larger book project that examines the discourse about Mexico's legendary wealth from the age of independence to the mid-20th century. 20th-century positivist critics maintained that their ancestors had inflated the extent of Mexico's natural riches and that the idea of "Mexico's legendary wealth" was an erroneous myth. According to critics, Alexander von Humboldt was one of the main culprits who articulated and disseminated the erroneous and inflated notion that Mexico was privileged with vast natural abundance. Critics measured Mexico's natural riches to demonstrate that Humboldt and other had exaggerated.

This paper has focused on Humboldt's *Political Essay* and approached the subject from a different perspective by deemphasizing the significance of positivism. It has underscored other influences that informed *Political Essay*, and has argued that it was not primarily a measuring project. It has explored the perspectives, goals, concerns, and values that informed Humboldt's *Political Essay*, and has argued that the Enlightenment's egalitarian and humanistic social ideals, imagination, economic visions, and a political reform agenda informed Humboldt's assessment.